

AP
ON FILE 5-10

WASHINGTON TIMES

22 May 1986

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Svetlana's witness, again

Svetlana Alliluyeva damaged her credibility when she became a double emigre, defecting from the Soviet Union in 1967, living in America and later briefly in England, returning to Russia in 1984 with some customary harsh words about America, and now coming back to Wisconsin with a complex account of her migrations.

She is clearly a difficult woman, with confused and shifting allegiances. But being Stalin's daughter and experiencing both his power and his sadism is a ticket to confusion: it goes with the territory. We would be foolish to dismiss the witness she bears in her latest interview, with former Moscow correspondent Raymond H. Anderson. You look for witnesses where you can find them.

The conditions of her unhappy private life have estranged her from both East and West, but her choice between the two is pretty clear. After all, except for her 18-month interval in Russia, she has spent the past 17 years of her life in the West — by choice, not compulsion.

Her brief return to Russia was the strange interlude of a mother separated from her children for 15 years, dreaming of rejoining her son and grandson in Russia and of bringing her newly won daughter along. Not so curiously, the family members who were so unhappy apart were even more unhappy together.

It was a naive dream, since she must have known that the Soviet rulers who kept her separated from her family would exact a price for her return.

The price was a disastrous press appearance in Moscow in November 1984. Intent on breaking the Soviet pattern of CIA-bashing by returning defectors, she said in her statement in Russian that "everyone [in America] was nice to me — I was a pet," which the interpreter translated "I was a pet dog of the CIA." There were other distortions. Svetlana was caught in a manip-

ulative bureaucratic web which her father had created.

She sees Mikhail Gorbachev as wanting to appear as "a modern civilized ruler," as compared with "the old half-alive rulers." The people expected much of him. But she reports them as disillusioned. They have somehow got the news of the new Chinese economy and its success. Taxi drivers and vegetable sellers at the bazaars told her openly that "private property is needed" and that "nothing can be done without private initiative."

This is important news which the Kremlinologists in the West have not reported with any authority. Even more important is Svetlana's news about incentives. "The Soviet people do work hard but they receive nothing for their labor" — which, she says, is the chief weakness of the regime. Mr. Gorbachev had a chance to break the bureaucracy and change this, but has missed it. "People were disappointed that the new leader brought nothing but a demand to work more."

This from the daughter of a ruler who worked millions to death and channeled resentments into a war patriotism.

It is worth adding that by the estimate of Dr. Robert Gale, the courageous bone-marrow expert who helped at Chernobyl, there was an exposure of 50,000 to 100,000 Russians to radiation. Mr. Gorbachev tried to deflect the resulting fears and resentments again into an anti-West war patriotism.

Judging from Svetlana's witness about the ordinary Russians and their disillusionment, it will be hard-going for him.

Max Lerner is a nationally syndicated columnist.